INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA (BENOIT) BARON

May , 2006

Barbara Baron: 69 years old
Born: Fort MacArthur, Los Angeles, CA
Address: 14628 Sylvan Street, Van Nuys, CA 91401

INTERVIEWER: So, why don't you just start off by saying… say your name and where you live. You know, all the basic information. So, you are…

BARBARA: I'm Barbara Baron. I was born Barbara Benoit and I was brought to Van Nuys when I was 2 months old, in probably May of 1937. And my parents had purchased the house [14628 Sylvan Street] like maybe January/February and I was born in March and then 2 months later we came and occupied the house.

INT: So you were born in March…

BARBARA: Of 1937.

INT: How do you spell your last name?

BARBARA: B-e-n-o-i-t was my family name.

INT: Do you have any recollection of your grandparents?

BARBARA: My grandparents were part.. they had come out from Chicago. My mother was a Chicago woman and my father was from New Jersey. And my grandparents came to California, too, before I was born. So at one point, we were all living in the Van Nuys house. In fact, my grandmother died in that house. But they had lived a couple other places and came back to Sylvan Street in later years and my grandmother died here.

INT: In what year did they come out, do you know?

BARBARA: They came out probably…my mother and father were married in 1934, probably, grandparents came out in '35, '36.

INT: And then what were their names?

BARBARA: Rolfe. Max and Helen Rolfe? And my parents were Sylvia and Joseph Benoit.

INT: And they were your paternal…?

BARBARA: Maternal.

INT: Maternal. And do you remember what your grandparents did?

BARBARA: He was a pharmacist.

INT: Oh, he was?

BARBAR: So he… when the depression happened in Chicago he was also a bank trustee or something and they lost quite a bit of money. And they came out here and he.. at one point he sold cars and then when we were in La Jolla, my father was stationed at Camp Callan on Torrey Pines, which is now where the University of California at San Diego is, he ran the pharmacy there for a while.

INT: And did he work here when they came up here, your grandfather?

BARBARA: Well, he worked… when he was selling cars they were living in the Palisades.

INT: So, do you know… where were your parents born?

BARBARA: My mother was born in Peoria, IL and my father was from Camden, New Jersey; somewhere in there. The family was northern New Jersey and southern New Jersey.

INT: And do you know the years they were born?

BARBARA: Yeah. My mother was born in 1907, July 1, 1907 and my father December 19, 1904.

INT: So they met or they came out here…

BARBARA: My father came out here… in those days they were adventurers. My father's younger brother had come out riding the rails to California. So then my father and his friend, Art Stanley, drove out here in an old, you know, whatever a car was in about 19… probably 19.. he was maybe 20, so he would have been… in 1934, approximately. And he did landscaping and he worked for Yahkomeen Council(sp?), which was an old landscape firm in Pasadena. And he did some work at Cal Tech where he met Einstein. And he was in the Reserves, the Army Reserves, so when World War II… oh, first, he went into the CCC Corps. And he helped engineer… he was one of the people who built Castaic Town; he was involved with that. And then when the War broke out, then they called him up as a regular officer.

INT: And then where was he during the War?

BARBARA: He, first, he went to a… when the War broke out he was at Camp Callan he was provost marshal – Chief of Police. And then when the War broke out they gave him a hundred Black troops, military police, which were trained in Arizona – two locations, Fort Wachika [Fort Huachuca] and Prescott and from there they went to New York and then went to North Africa and Italy.

INT: So, CCC is…?

BARBARA: Civilian Conservation Corps. So, he was on the dam for Castaic Lake; that project. And I don't know what other projects he was involved in because then the War happened and he was called up and became a military police officer.

INT: Did he talk anything about being the head of a Black…

BARBARA: No, he never talked about that. And I've only really learned by looking… since my mother died last year, looking at all the scrapbooks of his materials and what he had… And I took a whole grouping of things he had saved to Butterfields and it's going to be auctioned in June, as World War II memorabilia. And the people who were in World War II, and of course, I was a child – I was only eight and a half when he came home, so if he talked about it to anybody, I don't know. Those people who came back did not talk about the War because I know another friend of mine whose father was in the same time period and they just did not talk about it. And I was so young that I wouldn't be getting in on any of those conversations, anyway. I never did… he died when I was 32 and I never, you know… was motivated to ask him and I had never seen these scrapbooks until this last year.

INT: And then your mother?

BARBARA: She was from Chicago and had lived in Illinois most of their life, although, they had been in Michigan on a farm when she was quite small.

INT: Where in Michigan?

BARBARA: Dan's River.

INT: Where is that?

BARBARA: It's the Upper Peninsula. And my grandfather tried that out for a while, farming, and then they went back to Chicago and he was a pharmacist until… and my mother was pretty adventurous, she worked at Carson, Pirie, Scott, the big department store in downtown Chicago. So she came out here on vacation to visit relatives and on her second or third trip that she made out here, she met my father through a cousin and they were living at the Y together. And she met my adventurous father. And went back to Chicago and got her trousseau and came back out here and married him out here.

INT: What year did they get married?

BARBARA: 1934. And they lived a few different places with his work. I think they started out in Pasadena and then they lived in Santa Barbara when he was working on the Castaic project. I was born at Fort MacArthur, which you know, in San Pedro, which is now an adult school.

INT: I know the guy who runs the museum.

BARBARA: I've never been back there since I was born, so that's another thing I have to do.

INT: They have a wonderful museum down there now. I didn't think I would be that fascinated by it, but it's got a great history. So, they lived down there. I just wanted to back up for a second. Did your father ever say anything meeting Einstein?

BARBARA: He did. And I had two autograph pictures of Einstein, one of which I just sold, and I'm keeping the other one because it was autographed to my father. He wrote to him later when Einstein was at the Institute of Advanced Study and my father was stationed in Georgia and wrote him… two different times he wrote him and asked for autographed pictures and he got them. And the one that's autographed to my father's name I'm keeping and the other one I just sold.

INT: Do a little visit to the Antiques Road Show. So, they lived in Pasadena for a while and so then you say they were living down there…

BARBARA: They had a little property in the Palisades after I was born in Fort MacArthur and then they had bought the place in Van Nuys, you know, toward the end of my mother's pregnancy, so they moved into Van Nuys when I was two months old.

INT: Do you remember where you were born there? Was it at home or in a hospital?

BARBARA: At the hospital at Fort MacArthur. At the Army hospital.

INT: On the actual Fort. That's amazing. Yeah, you definitely should take a field trip down there.

BARBARA: Yeah, I mean to do that.

INT: I'm also… for the LA Conservancy, I do a tour of San Pedro. Just a small part, just north of Fort MacArthur. So, two months later they come and they buy this house, and do you remember them ever talking about… you had told me already that this was an up-and-coming area…

BARBARA: And my mother… they had a choice between, I forget where else they looked at houses, but they picked this place to buy and at that time, they were all small houses or rows of cottages on the lots; on the street.

INT: On Sylvan, or just around?

BARBARA: Yes, on Sylvan Street. And it was also one of the two wide streets. Sylvan Street and Hamlin are wider than the other East-West streets and they liked that. And there were pepper trees that were at the curb and they used to meet in the middle of the street. It was very shady and… most of the pepper trees are gone. There are a few left, but most of them have died. So, when I was in third or fourth grade range, we had been down in the San Diego area, La Jolla, for a while… we used to play hide and seek and we used the pepper trees and that was part of our hiding.

INT: And at that time when they moved here, he was doing…?

BARBARA: He was either CCC or a Reserve officer by that point. He had left behind the landscaping work and he had been called in because he was a Reserve officer in New Jersey; in the Reserves since high school, however they did that. And then when the War broke out… well, actually, before the War he went into Camp Callan in La Jolla when I was like maybe three, three and a half, because we went down there until he went overseas. And then during the War my mother sold that house, which would now be worth a fortune – we wee three blocks from the beach - and came back here to Van Nuys when I was like eight.

INT: So, then when he would go away from Van Nuys, you would rent, they would rent this house out.

BARBARA: Yes, and interestingly enough, we had the same mailbox from Day One; Box 8, Van Nuys, California. And of course, the post office was originally on Sylvan Street. And we had the same phone number, 785-3929, which was… my parents never disconnected the line. The tenants, evidently, used the same phone number. So it's been the same phone number for 69 and some years.

INT: Oh, my Gosh, that's incredible.

BARBARA: I know, it is amazing. And people ask when I give the address. "Eight?" And I'm probably the oldest… it's the oldest box-holder in Van Nuys.

INT: That's amazing. That's shocking. So, then, what area… do you have any memories before you started school, and, if not, what are the first memories you might have?

BARBARA: I just remember when I was very young, we could walk up to Kester to visit a chicken farm at Kester and Sylvan Street. Mrs. Alcott, she was a friend of my mothers, I think, in the Business and Professional Woman's Club, and they ran a

chicken farm at the end of the street. And it was very rural. And Sepulveda was cabbage fields. And we would drive over to… this is probably when I was a little bit older, when I was eight, and I remember driving over Beverly Glen to get to Westwood to go shopping in this little village of Westwood, which had the two spires there and the movie theatre and the gas station, I think, that had the spires. And beautiful flowers on the entry from Wilshire Boulevard into the little village. At the middle of Beverly Glen Canyon was like a horseback riding place and little cottages that were summer residences for people through Beverly Glen.

INT: And why would you go… was that the…?

BARBARA: Westwood was… you know, it was an outing to go to Westwood to shop. And I think they had nicer stores in there. And there was a bakery, Van de Kamps, at one of the markets there. And I just remember that was sort of a regular place to go.

INT: And how was that drive? Was it considerably different then…

BARBARA: Oh, my goodness. Beverly Glen was just a rural canyon like in the country.

INT: Paved? Was it paved then?

BARBARA: Oh, yeah, it was paved.

INT: And probably not as many trees or anything like that.

BARBARA: I just remember it was just all small places and the, you know, the horseback riding… one of my father's friends lived in (?) It was just country. And Sepulveda Boulevard; I just always can remember it was just vast fields of cabbage or whatever else was growing. And we'd go through the tunnel… you know, the mountain; of course, the tunnel was there, and I would say, I don't know how old I was, I would say, "Here come the tunnel." I remember that they would tell me that… that I would say that. And we would drive over to the Palisades, because at one point, my grandparents had a duplex at the Palisades. (?)

INT: And what did they take down to get over there? Sunset?

BARBARA: Sunset. You would go Sepulveda to Sunset.

INT: So you went to elementary school…

BARBARA: Part of… I went to Van Nuys Elementary School a year and a half and I went to Van Nuys Junior High School in seventh and ninth grades and Van Nuys High School the early part of tenth grade and the early part of eleventh grade. I went to high school in Alaska, Van Nuys and Georgia. Go figure. I was an Army Brat.

INT: So, you went to… in elementary school, which year and a half? The later part of grammar school?

BARBARA: The latter part of third grade and all of fourth grade. And I think I walked there with friends. When I was in junior high we took the Pacific Electric… I was in the very first class, seventh grade, when Van Nuys Junior High School was first built. And they had to split the day because the building wasn't complete yet. So, part of us went in the morning and the other class went in the afternoon. I think I was in the morning class. We had to get there at some really early hour. And we took the… each of us who lived, you know, either on one side, east side or west side of Van Nuys Boulevard, would walk to the Boulevard and rendezvous on the Pacific Electric and took the Red Car down to the Junior High School.

INT: And where was the Junior High School?

BARBARA: The Junior High School is approximately… a little south of Chandler off of Vesper – on Vesper. I think when I was in ninth grade is when Bobs Big Boy opened down there. That was not the first Bobs Big Boy, but that was a big deal when that opened down there on Van Nuys Boulevard. It's a car dealership now.

INT: Right. Do you remember exactly what the cross-street was?

BARBARA: It was close to Chandler, but I don't know what the cross-street was.

INT: Okay. So, then that was Junior High. Back up to elementary, do you remember.. it was the newer; the present one.

BARBARA: Yes, it was the present one. I hadn't seen that other picture before. And the same row of classes, that same building was there that I went to school with. I know which room I had third grade in along those, that row there. And there was still big trees on the playground. They've added (?)

INT: Do you have any particular memories of that time period there?

BARBARA: Getting rapped on my fingers with a ruler by Miss Zarinski, my third grade teacher. I had no idea (?)

INT: What had you done?

BARBARA: I have no idea. Probably talked too much. I was a great talker. And we had a wonderful fourth grade teacher. I remember her; Mrs. Win(?) She let us comb her hair on the playground and she had combs, you know, the fancy combs and we would put the combs in her hair or something. (?) And the man who… on the horseback… that does the lariat thing, he used… Monty Montana. He came to visit the school.

INT: So, you had probably walked over there, because you were close?

BARBARA: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I think. Even though I was pretty young. You know, it was safe. Yeah. I don't remember being driven to school.

INT: Then you go away for a while…

BARBARA: I was going back and forth all the time.

INT: You would hop on the PE to go down to the Junior High. What.. you're like, what, two stops?

BARBARA: No, no. It was more than a mile. It's about a mile and a half, something like that. It might be two miles. Then we would walk home on Vesper. There was a congregation of girls, and there were a couple of, not in seventh grade so much, ninth grade there was some boys. But we would just walk our way home. Sometimes we walked on Van Nuys Boulevard and there was an ice cream store or we would come down all the way to Sutton's Drug Store on Sylvan Street and go in there and have the Coke or whatever. I remember that drug store fondly, though.

INT: That, apparently, has been there from the beginning. And what else about that store? Was it, did it look like…?

BARBARA: It was a traditional… you know, it had the stools with the counter and we would all, you know, congregate on the stools around the counter. And then toward the actual entry of the store was where there were all cosmetics and the pharmacy, I suppose, whatever a regular drug store has now. And then on the corner of Friar was the Owl Drug Store. Whatever it was, I just remember something to do with owl. And it was not… it had a lunch counter, but it was not a classy drug store like Sutton's was. And I can remember even when I was back at UCLA in 1954, somewhere, going in there… I mean, things were dusty. They had been so long in the store. And now it's the 99 Cent Store on the corner.

INT: Which corner is that?

BARBARA: It was the northwest corner. It was the, whatever, Owl something whatever drug store. And along Van Nuys Boulevard there was two theatres, the Fox and there were two… one was south of Sylvan Street and the other one was north of Sylvan Street, so that there… we could congregate (?)

INT: Where was the one south?

BARBARA: It was on the side of the street where the Van Nuys Civic Center is. And that was like pawn shops and Van Nuys got, you know, Sylvan Street… it got to be a little

tackier going south and there were pawn shops and it was… Rivoli, it was called, the Rivoli Theatre. And my grandfather called it the "Sit and Scratch" because it was sort of old and funky…

INT: I'm sorry, he called it the what?

BARBARA: The "Sit and Scratch". Because the seats were broken and they were kind of rough and I couldn't go there alone. And I had to go with him or go with friends because it was considered, not the good theatre. The Fox Theatre was good. And there were two dime stores, like Woolworths and Newberry's on the west side of Van Nuys Boulevard. And, of course, when I was in third and fourth grade that was a big event to go to the dime store.

INT: The Fox, you can still see the street… out in front of the street.

BARBARA: Oh, really? I've never paid attention to that.

INT: The guy who used to do Kings Western Wear, I talked to him some.

BARBARA: Yes, Kings, right, I remember.

INT: He said you can still see the front of it.

BARBARA: Which block is it in? Between Victory and the next… and Gilmore.

INT: I always forget which one…

BARBARA: It's not between Sylvan and Victory.

INT: No, it's just north of that.

BARBARA: It's the next one. I've never known. I walk down there all the time.

INT: And you would never know it because it's a swap meet.

BARBARA: The Swap Meet place.

INT: And my understanding was, and I think he told me this or I might have read it, that there was a… something in front of it… a furniture store originally or something, and the guy who owned it actually opened up the back… either added on or made it larger or something, because if you walk in there now you couldn't understand how that could possibly have been a theatre. I have the exact address.

BARBARA: That's very interesting. The next time I walk downtown I'm going to…

INT: You can see the terrazzo pattern.

BARBARA: I never paid attention to that. When we were in Junior High School we would rendezvous (?)

INT: Do you remember anything about that actual, anything specific about the theatre?

BARBARA: I don't remember how big it was or anything. And to go to the La Reina Theatre, which is now, I think, it's the Gap in Sherman Oaks… that was a big event because you had to be driven there by your family, your parents. And that was a classier neighborhood up there. And you could take the bus up all the way to Ventura Boulevard and walk to the La Reina. But the top part is still there.

INT: That's S. Charles Lee. He's a very famous architect who designed that. So they made sure they kept, at least, the outside.

BARBARA: And Du Pars is on Ventura Boulevard. I think that's still there isn't it?

INT: Near Coldwater? Or Laurel? Anything else about the Junior High? Any clubs or anything like that?

BARBARA: You know, it was really nice. It was beautiful. It was a brand new school.. And we were the first seventh grade in the school and our graduating class, even though I was in Chicago during eighth grade, but… So I was back to graduate in ninth grade, so we were the first graduating class, technically, that had gone through the school. And there were 900 of us. That was in 1949… I was class of '54 High School, so that would be 1950 and that was a lot of kids. Yeah. I don't know how Van Nuys High School… how many kids were there then. And I've gone back at a reunion at Van Nuys High School and been on the grounds here… I haven't gone back to the Junior High School. And now they're all locked. You can't go in and look easily. You have to be supervised. It's very different.

INT: Any clubs or anything like that? Were you a part…?

BARBARA: Oh, yeah. I was in, I think, I don't remember, I was in… I got academic awards. And had my group of friends and was in, at the High School, a club called Delta (?) and was, you know, a lot of the kids that I knew were leaders. At the time I didn't know it, Robert Redford was in our class at the High School. And my friend, one of my friends had dated him, but I didn't know him. He wasn't part of our original group; not from the Junior High, he wasn't there. And Don Drysdale who was a famous baseball player… he was definitely part of our crowd from the Junior High School and he had a bad temper then. And Diane Baker…

INT: Why do you remember he had a bad temper?

BARBARA: I just remember. He was somebody, you know, who would get angry. And one of our friends went on to become a CBS executive, I think. (?) because I'm not

sure whether it was ABC or CBS. He went on to that realm. And Diane Baker, who was an actress for a while in certain things… she was, I think she was in the class behind me. (?)

INT: And at that time, Marilyn and Rosalind?

BARBARA: Marilyn Monroe was older. So, she had been in Van Nuys High School, but she was like a couple years older. Natalie Wood was, I think, a year… I think she was one year behind my particular group. I didn't know her personally. (?)

INT: Rosalind Russell?*

BARBARA: She would have been older, too. I didn't know she went to Van Nuys High School.

INT: And she dated somebody… I don't know. They went to the prom together.

BARBARA: And interestingly one of my very closest friends from third grade and fourth grade, they made the movie "Casino" about her. She had gone to Las Vegas and became a show girl and knew somebody in the Mafia. That whole story was about Jeremy Gaye and Sharon Stone played her part. And she was (?) murdered. She was found dead in Hollywood a few years later. That movie came out in, I came back here in '93.. I think that movie came out in '94 because they were talking about it at our reunion we had in '94. Our 40 year reunion.

INT: On Sylvan, do you remember as a kid, like you said, you remember playing among the pepper trees… anything else like that that you remember?

BARBARA: I just remember when I was in third and fourth grades my grandfather would walk me to the post office every day for the mail. And the Van Nuys Hotel was a little hotel at the corner of Friar and Van Nuys Boulevard. And Mr. Kahn was the owner of the hotel and, it may have been we went the same time every day, because he always had a Hershey Bar for me. And I loved the old post office, you know; they had the little brass boxes and they had the foyer part where the windows were and then around the corner were the mailboxes. So, when I came back here, after I came back to go to UCLA and it was gone. The post office was gone. It wasn't… they had moved it to the new location. It was kind of sad.

INT: You went to the building that is still there, though.

BARBARA: The building's there, but it's Children of the Night. And the library was the corner of Vesper and Sylvan and my grandfather used to take me to the library. And this is during wartime when my father is overseas and my grandfather was a great help to me academically. He was a great supporter of my growth in that way. And we would go to the library and he would help me with my reports or

whatever I had to do for fourth grade. And I like that library. I've been in that library a lot.

INT: And you were a good student?

BARBARA: Oh, yeah. I'm still in school. I'm always learning something.

INT: Anything else about those early years?

BARBARA: Just that – the movies, and the post office and the library and it was all very convenient there. And a little anecdotal thing about Junior High School, there was an epidemic of people setting palm trees on fire. And the palm trees were on Erwin and Delano. So that every time there was a palm tree fire, we would gather up our valuables or whatever so we'd be ready in case another place in the neighborhood caught fire. None of the houses ever caught on fire. But it was something that the Hispanic kids were doing over there. In those days, Sylvan Street was the last street before it began to be mixed neighborhood. Sylvan Street was all Caucasian.

INT: Going north?

BARBARA: Gong south. So, by the time you got to Delano, that was the neighborhood I was supposed to not be involved with. And there were not very many Hispanic children at the High School. I don't remember… and at the Junior High School, not very many. There were a small number. But I remember there were palm tree fires. And we could hear the brick plant which was on – it was somewhere on Kester near Oxnard where they made bricks; they fired bricks. And you could hear the furnace going off, "Whoosh". And the railroad tracks were on Oxnard.

INT: I know the actual organ company left before your family moved here, but do you remember the building that was on the northwest corner of Oxnard?

BARBARA: The only big buildings that I remember on Van Nuys Boulevard were the mortuaries. There was – Praiswater had beautiful grounds there, I think, it was on the west side of Van Nuys Boulevard and there was another mortuary. And a way further down was Bobs Big Boy and then coming closer to Oxnard there was one little ice creamy type of… it wasn't a drug store, but it was a little place you could drop in, you know, kids could drop in. That's all about I remember about Van Nuys Boulevard.

INT: So, south of Oxnard there wasn't a lot of…?

BARBARA: I don't know. A little bit of small businesses and the big Praiswater place and whatever. I don't know what was further down. Between like… starting maybe at… I have no clue what was going on between, you know, Oxnard and Burbank and going down there, other than the few little places that we stopped at. There

were buildings there, but I don't know what kinds of businesses they were. There was a market. On Van Nuys Boulevard was an actual grocery store in the block, you know, the same block between Sylvan Street and Erwin there was an old time grocery store.

INT: On the east side?

BARBARA: No, on the west side. Then on Friar there was a grain and feed store which is now a legal building and my grandfather and I would walk over there and buy horse meat to cook for my dog. And then further, between Vesper and Van Nuys Boulevard, was a grocery store. So, we could walk to the drug store, the grocery store, the grain and feed store, the post office, the library… al of it was just totally convenient and then to take the Red Car to go to Long Beach to visit relatives there and for me to go to school.

INT: Growing up time, did you ever take it to go downtown?

BARBARA: We went down… I never took it… I came back here to go to college in '54 and the Red Car was gone. And the house was rented. My parents were living back east and I came out to UCLA. So, I wasn't really involved in the Valley. And then when I was young, we took the Red Car to Long Beach. I don't know whether we had to change somewhere, but, you know, we went down Chandler to Hollywood… maybe we changed and went on another line to go to Long Beach to visit my grandmother's sister.

INT: And you don't remember going downtown shopping or anything like that?

BARBARA: No, our shopping was Westwood and Bullocks Wilshire and May Company in there. If we were going to go shopping away from the Valley for clothes or whatever.

INT: In Westwood, on Wilshire, there must have been Pacific Electric?

BARBARA: No. That was driving. There was no Pacific Electric on Wilshire Boulevard.

INT: So, you would go to Bullocks on Wilshire.

BARBARA: My mother (?) clothes for us. And, you know, we went to May Company, we went to Bullocks in Westwood and, occasionally, we went to the Tea Room at the Bullocks in Westwood. I remember we would do that. And then, occasionally, to Bullocks Wilshire; that store. When I went to UCLA and she came out and she took me shopping for beautiful clothes to go through sorority rush and I remember getting something from Bullocks Wilshire.

INT: And then the store on the southwest corner of Sylvan and Van Nuys, which is now the General Store?

BARBARA: That was the bank, then.

INT: The bank. While you were growing up that was all the bank?

BARBARA: First it was the bank, then it became, I don't know when, it became the Army Surplus and then it became the General, you know, the cowboy store. Whether there was anything in there, I don't know, I just remember that those three were. When I came back here from Chicago, we came back when I was in eighth grade – my father had been sent to Alaska and we came back here – and so I went to business school over the bank. And took typing and shorthand when I was thirteen; down on the corner there. Because they said my grades were good enough I didn't have to go back into school for three months in eighth grade, so I went to business school for three months before I went back to Junior High in the Fall.

INT: So, that was all accredited?

BARBARA: Yeah. I had had superior grades from Chicago and whatever, I don't know how that worked out, sort of like skipping part of the grade. And I connected with my old friends from elementary school, but I went to typing and shorthand when I was thirteen.

INT: And the Woman's Club… do you remember…?

BARBARA: The Woman's Club… my mother was a member of the Business and Professional Woman's Club. She wasn't a member of the regular Woman's Club. And then she went on to become a member of the Garden Club. And at various times, both of those clubs met in that building. So, when I came back out here in 1993, the Garden Club was still meeting over on, oh, I don't know where their gardens are… somewhere over off the 101, but they had something at the building or whatever. So my mother's ninetieth birthday, I remember, that meeting we had in the old Woman's Club. And I had one piano recital there when I was about nine years old.

INT: What was that like?

BARBARA: You know, you're nervous (?) I think. I think I stood up with my hands still on the keys or something; on the stage. But it was very… when we went back there for these Garden Club meetings that I went to with my mother, these recent years, looked exactly the same. Hardly any change.

INT: You took piano lessons where?

BARBARA: I took piano lessons at home and the teacher happened to live next door. And Ruth Gish, whom you know, she was a piano teacher across the street, but there was a piano teacher on my side of the street, too, and that was my piano teacher.

INT: So, she would come over to your place. Next door.

BARBARA: Yeah.

INT: Do you have any idea what you paid?

BARBARA: I have no idea. And I had that beginning book for years. It got lost finally when we… I had it for a very long time. I can't play the piano now, I didn't continue long enough.

INT: Do you remember going to the Woman's Club any other times?

BARBARA: No, just in the recent times with my mother… whatever those few meetings were and the recital.

INT: Who were your parents' friends around?

BARBARA: Well, you know, because my father was in the Service and they had friends that were sort of spread out. Like one of the long time friends, they lived in San Fernando and my father and he had been in the Civilian Conservation Corps together. And my uncle lived over on Wyandote and we would get together. As far as neighborhood friends were concerned, the woman who owned the chicken farm at the end of the street, until she died, she was a friend of my mother's for all those years; Mildred Alcott.

INT: And that was on the northwest…?

BARBARA: It was on the east side of Kester. I mean, excuse me.. where Sylvan Street dead-ends into Kester on the west side. And the other thing about Kester was the Crystal Plunge. I don't know what block that was in, but it was on the other side of Victory and that was where we went swimming at whatever stage that was, where the Crystal Plunge was. And one of my very best friends' mother taught swimming there. And then she went on to open the first swimming school in the Valley – Rita Curtis Swim Schools. She ended up with, I think, about three or four swim schools, ultimately. She was the one who innovated her own swim schools. And Andy Devine lived on one of those corners there, near the Crystal Plunge, with the split rail… the rail ranch fence, on the corner, I remember that.

INT: Do you ever remember seeing him?

BARBARA: No, but he was the honorary Mayor of Van Nuys. That's all I remember. He had this house, you know, typical nice old ranch house with that rail fence around the

front and with roses growing on it. And it was somewhere near where Crystal Plunge was.

INT: And that was north of Victory?

BARBARA: It was on Kester.

INT: But north of Victory?

BARBARA: Yeah, north of Victory. Now there are apartment buildings all through there. You can't identify where those things are. But I think Crystal Plunge was before the High School. Seems to be it was between Victory and Kittridge, which would be just Gilmore and (?) and Hamlin. Somewhere in there.

INT: Do you remember in High School any teachers who were particularly something or another?

BARBARA: Yeah, there was one English teacher – I can't think of his name right now – but he placed us… he had us seated by our names and then the first day of class he called me Arabrab Tioneb – he pronounced my name backwards and that made quite an impression. And, evidently, you know, we liked him a lot. And when I came back to UCLA, I went back and visited him. He was still there. (?)

INT: And what did he teach?

BARBARA: English.

INT: Anybody else?

BARBARA: I don't remember anybody else. He was my favorite one. And then in the Junior High School – when I was in seventh grade, I was… I don't know why they did this, but we had officers in all of our classes. So, a Jewish boy and myself, we were always the President and the Vice-President and I was the President and he was the Vice-President and he was the President and I was the Vice-President of our class. Whatever that was about, I have no idea, except I remember that. Stan Cohen.

INT: Stan Cohen. Remember what happened to him?

BARBARA: I think he's still alive, actually. There was a high school reunion I went to; the 40th one. They always kept me on the list, even though I graduated in Georgia, but they always kept me linked with the group here. Bill Reeve. He died.

SIDE B

INT: … people drive down the street and see Whitsett Street and people don't think about it.

BARBARA: Who is Whitsett?

INT: Yeah, who's Whitsett.

BARBARA: I didn't know until you told me that Whitsett was the builder of the first houses. And my mother thought that it was only three, and you told me it was ten, that were built the first year. I didn't know that. I think there might be one on Kittridge that you might look into. Because it sits back and has a second story dormer. It's old and it's got the porch in front and it has a second floor. A girlfriend of mine lived there. It's between Sylmar and Hazeltine.

INT: I think I know which one it is.

BARBARA: On the north side of the street.

INT: I know which one you mean, because it also says 1911 in the MLS.

BARBARA: Are they any other ones?

INT: We have suspicions because, what they look like now, it's difficult to tell.

BARBARA: And the Sutton house where the man who sold to my parents, Ed Sutton, moved to the corner of Vesper and whatever that is… Gilmore or whatever, down there. That's a little bit later. That was, what?

INT: '20's. Ed Sutton lived in your house. He was the son.

BARBARA: Ruth Gish knew the Sutton girls. She called them the Sutton girls. There were two daughters, apparently, of Ed Sutton, not the senior Sutton who had the drugstore. And she used to play with those girls. And the way my house is built, I have no clue how they managed with two children in there because it was a double parlor in the front, dining room and a kitchen and a very small bedroom and like a sleeping porch on the back. How you had a family with four people there, I have no idea.

INT: It was one bedroom?

BARBARA: Because at that time, it was set up as a one bedroom. My father was the one who made the one parlor into a bedroom, in the front. So, yeah. I have to ask Ruth about that. She'll know. Because my parents are the ones who changed the configuration of the rooms.

INT: So, when you went to the Sutton Drugstore, it was Ed Sutton?**

BARBARA: I don't know whether it was his father or him. By then, it must have been him, because by the time I was 14 years old, probably the senior Sutton wasn't… he might have been there. I don't know.

INT: I know Mrs. Mendenhall was very involved in the Woman's Clubs. Your mother definitely would have known her.

BARBARA: My mother did know her. My mother was in the Business and Professional Woman's Club, she wasn't in the regular Woman's Club. But I know she met Mendenhall and there was another woman who was quite active in many ways. I can't think of her name, now – in one of my mother's clubs, she was very, very active. She had a pre-school and one of my children went to her pre-school for awhile. Yeah, Ruth Gish is the last of the ones who are of the really old Sylvan Street because she came here in 1920. I mean, her parents go back… I think she's around, isn't she like 93 now. She was 90 when I met her. She knew my grandparents, you know, way back.

INT: Do you remember having anything at all about Whitsett or Whitley?

BARBARA: No.

INT: Because they had their house just south – it's where Deardon's is. The big, huge department store, now; on the west side, just below Vanowen on Van Nuys.

BARBARA: North of Vanowen?

INT: South.

BARBARA: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, I remember at some point something about that block in there. Tell me what that was.

INT: I don't really know too much about it other than you had to go back in a ways before you got to the house. He had installed in the house a Robert Morton organ from the Oxnard/Van Nuys place and he was upset because it was so big; it was way too big for the size of the house. They had a room underneath the house for the chamber. But then, eventually, he had one at the end, where Van Nuys Boulevard hits Ventura and up in the hills someplace. The book that they have actually shows the patio. Then the Whitley mansion that was the Praiswater Funeral Home.

BARBARA: Whitley was Praiswater Funeral Home. That was why that was such a beautiful property. What was the name of the other funeral home besides Praiswater? I thought it began with a "P", too. Both my grandparents and my father were buried out of either Praiswater or the other one in Forest Lawn. But my mother

was cremated out of where they had moved it down Victory Boulevard all the way past North Hollywood.

INT: Oh, that… near Burbank, near the airport.

BARBARA: And it was the same name as I knew where my grandparents and my father… it was the same home, but they've moved it down there. And I'm not sure whether it was Praiswater or the other one that was in Van Nuys. Is it Praiswater that's the one down there?

INT: Yes.

BARBARA: Yes.

INT: Oh, no, I'm not sure what that is. It's very old.

BARBARA: And the corner… there's a funeral home on one of the corners in Van Nuys, and I think it went (?) It wasn't the big Praiswater one. I didn't realize (?)

INT: So, you had said about the feed company on Friar. On the northwest corner?

BARBARA: Northeast corner of Friar and Vesper. And I can remember it because it was open, you know, with… it had the pull down door thing where it was open during the day and you walked in there and you could smell all of the whatever they had there. And then they had the counter where they sold, I don't know what beside horse meat… but we would buy the horse meat to cook for my dog. I always liked the smell of hardware stores and those kinds of places. I miss that from… back east I lived in a small town for a while with that flavor to it.

INT: You said it was the corner of Friar and Vesper?

BARBARA: Just a little east. And you can see the size of the building. It's kind of a little bit of a strange design and then further up on Friar on the right, which is now a church, a Hispanic church, there was actually a produce store.

INT: And also the Elks. There's an Elks on Friar. Do you know anything…?

BARBARA: No. But my father was in the Elks for a while, but I don't know if he went there. He was also a Shriner. You know, a Masonic Shriner. When he retired. And I found a little Elks Club pin among his stuff. And I didn't know…

INT: Did you ever go in that building?

BARBARA: No. But Bargain Books, you know, is one of the old, original buildings which I have been ??? since I was 18 years old. And they would have moved, except they own the building.

INT: I talked to the guy once. He is the son of the original owner. And then the Sons of Norway is down there a little bit. They've been there since the '50's.

BARBARA: There are stores that go way back. Kings was still here when I came back 12 years ago and then they moved. And then the – a store that was a fabric, sewing – that was really old. That was down near Deardon's. It was in there. And the drug store – the 99 Cent Store took over the drug store and that fabric place, down in there. And that was old. And there was – I'm trying to think if there was anything left that was still from way, way, way back. Just Kings is the only one I think that when I came back 13 years ago was still original. That used to be on the corner of Victory – Victory and Van Nuys Boulevard.

INT: Any other like fun kid places. Theatres.

BARBARA: Drug stores, dime store, theatres. The little park that's on the same street that the Y is on which has a tennis court and so forth, that was there. We would go there and fool around, whatever. I'm trying to think if there were any other parks or playgrounds we went to. I don't remember… I was in the Brownies, I don't remember where we met. And the Crystal Plunge and then when the Van Nuys-Sherman Oaks Park opened, that was the same time as Van Nuys Junior High School – I think it was in Ninth Grade - we were bused over there to take swimming. And the park was brand new. I learned to dive off the diving board in that park. And I took my kids there too. They learned to play their first shoe ball was in that park.

INT: They have a fantastic pool there. I think it's an Olympic-sized pool.

BARBARA: Yeah. So that was brand new when I was in Junior High School. My kids also went there. My children – I went to Van Nuys Elementary for a little bit. My children went to (?) Kester Elementary and then we moved to Sherman Oaks and they both went to Sherman Oaks Elementary when they were 8 to 10.

INT: Where did you live in Sherman Oaks?

BARBARA: On Laneida(?) and then on Greenleaf. And our Greenleaf house – both of our houses are still there. Many houses have been torn down and much bigger houses have been built. Those were houses from 1948/1950. Three bedroom, cute houses. A lot has changed.

INT: Do you remember when the – were you around when the whole civic center transformation began?

BARBARA: You mean this current transformation? Oh, yeah. And my mother lived to see that happen.

INT: Were people happy about it?

BARBARA: Sure. Yeah. It was really good.

INT: And the City Hall…

BARBARA: It was all part of the nice buildings that were the original core of the Van Nuys government. And the library… is the library also 1934?

INT: No, the '60's.

BARBARA: No, no. I mean, the old…

INT: Yes. Around '31, I'd say.***

BARBARA: And how about the post office… the old post office?

INT: That's like '30… late '20's, I think.****

BARBARA: Late '20's? So, that was before the City Hall was built.

INT: Yeah. Originally, the City Hall was in where the fire department is across the street.

BARBARA: Before they built it?

INT: Yeah.

BARBARA: Oh, I didn't know that.

INT: You mentioned to me also something about a restaurant, was that on Erwin Street, which would now have been in the middle of the mall?

BARBARA: Not in the middle of the mall. It was on the west side of Van Nuys Boulevard. It may have just been… I don't know if there was any truth in it, because (?) showed me where they thought… where they knew that the Van Nuys house was, which was in North Hollywood, Mr. Van Nuys' home, but the joke was that… there's some motors along there and then there's a glass company and where the glass company is now is where there was a restaurant and a patio. The flowers that grew around the patio just grew wild and, I mean, they just were fabulous and nobody paid much attention except to water them, but they were so lush. And the joke was that this had been a part of the horse part of the ranch or something. And there's one lemon tree in the back… that I don't know if is still standing, since the glass company took it over. But that… my lemon tree is as old as the house, evidently. And my grapefruit tree and the orange tree were probably planted when the house was built. And their still standing. Other trees have died

on the property. Two walnut trees died and one big apricot tree was taken out when the apartments next door were built.

INT: And what about the Valley as a whole when you were growing up?

BARBARA: I just remember when I was a kid, it was like a small town in the country. Van Nuys was Van Nuys Boulevard. And almost nothing on the inside streets; and Sepulveda was fields. And Kester was the chicken farm. I don't remember what else was on Kester. Probably some fields and farms when I was little, you know, what… 65 years ago.

INT: Did you ever go on like country outings or anything like that?

BARBARA: Oh, sure. You would go out the Santa Monica Mountains to the beach. We would take whatever the road would be out toward Malibu. And then cross… go into the country, you go to Beverly Glen and crossing over to Westwood. And Westwood was just this cute, little cozy one street, you know, with a little bit on the (?) a little village, really. So by the time I came back to go to UCLA, it had grown much more and then when I came back to visit my mother at one time, I was in – it was in, maybe, in the '70's. And I had gone somewhere and I was on Wilshire Boulevard and I came to the cross-section of Wilshire Boulevard and Westwood and I didn't know where I was, because by then there were high rise buildings and I thought, "Oh, my God. This was my little college town." You know, in the '50's. And the campus didn't go all the way… now, you know, the center of the campus was the old buildings, I'm sure you're familiar with that. There was, a little bit north of that, and it was all eucalyptus trees and parking lots and whatever and it kept growing, so that now… there's practically no wild area. I don't know if there is any wild area left. Probably not. Because now, (?) between Sunset and Le Conte. And when I went, you had to be in a sorority. There's only one dorm, Pershing Hall, and you had to have applied for it in advance, because there was only a small number of people. So, to get housing, going to a sorority was the way to get a place to live. And if you didn't get a place to live, you became a commuter. And if you happened to be a local girl you could commute from home. So, I was in a sorority. I had a place to live. My parents were in Georgia.

INT: And what sorority was it?

BARBARA: Pi Beta Phi.

INT: And was it on Hilgard?

BARBARA: Hilgard Avenue.

INT: Now, when you would come in and out of the house, over the years when the family would move on, you had renters?

BARBARA: Yes.

INT: Almost every time, as far as you know?

BARBARA: Yeah. Well, there was a point in time when my grandparents just went there and lived. And we were in Chicago, Alaska and Georgia and my grandparents were there. And then my grandmother died in 1954 when I was a senior in high school. And my mother came out from Georgia and she brought my grandfather back to Georgia and he died six months later in Georgia. My grandmother was about, I think, 72, my grandfather was 77, something like that. And he just, you know, he couldn't take (?) he didn't live very long. So then they rented the property and we didn't come back living on the property until my parents retired from the Service in '55. And I got married and went in the Navy to Maryland with my husband who graduated from UCLA. When we came back, then we were in the house before we went to Chicago.

INT: So they would just arrange… the tenants were probably a month-by-month…

BARBARA: (?) We didn't have leases or anything.

INT: So they would just say, we're coming back, you've got a couple weeks, and…

BARBARA: Well, whatever. They didn't give notice. My parents lived in the apartment, for a while, after the Service. They let the house stay with whoever the tenants were. And then we came out and had the house and then after my husband and I and our two babies, young children, moved out, then my parents moved back into the house. And then my mother stayed in the house… my father died in 1968 and my mother lived there alone… and she just died last year in 2005 [age 98] and she lived alone there in the house from 1968 until I came out in '93.

INT: And you say, initially, there was all – that you remember – was just all…

BARBARA: Little old bungalow houses and on a few of the lots there were little cottages that you went in from the street. And there is still one of those in the next block, where you can drive in and there's little bungalows, cottages on each side of the driveway.

INT: So there were lots of those?

BARBARA: Yeah. And then individual houses, yeah. And mostly they all had the big front porch on them. And the big pepper trees in the street were all very shady. It was cozy. My mother just, I mean, I tell you, she was (?) to see what happened. It was really hard for her.

INT: It's a long time, most people don't…

BARBARA: She said, "I didn't come to live in Mexico." It was just really hard for her. I'm so used to it, now. I've been back for 12… 12 and a half years and I have lived in so many places. I don't have a problem with… my generation, with the prejudice or ethnic issue. You know, I mean, everywhere you go now it's a mixed culture. But my mother was, you know, she was born in 1904 and 1907; it was really hard for her to accept it. So, she and Ruth would compare notes about (?) Mother would ask me to invite Ruth to come over from time to time and they would have their, sort of their, formal chitchat. And Ruth, you know, gets around by bus. She never drove.

INT: I was talking to her. And I suggested maybe she might want to come over and she sort of didn't pick up on it.

BARBARA: But do talk to her. Because she's very lucid and she's as sharp as my mother was and she knows lots of detail. Because she's a generation older than me, she knows things that I don't know.

INT: Do you remember like the Christmas Parade? Was that still going on when you were…

BARBARA: No. Oh, yes, I do. Now that you mention it. I remember, whether it was Christmas or Fourth of July, I don't know. But I remember going and standing along the Boulevard for a parade. Yes, I do remember that. And I don't know what age I was.

INT: I think the Christmas Parade went on for… maybe the '60's, I'm not sure, but definitely the '50's.

BARBARA: No, I definitely remember going up to Van Nuys Boulevard to stand for a parade. I don't know which parade. I lived in a little town back east and they had a parade for everything. I had forgotten all about that in Van Nuys. And the Christmas decorations, I think, they had much more elaborate than (?) And, you know, I really missed the… you know, Van Nuys Boulevard is a really wide Boulevard and I think it was made that way because if the Red Cars started in 1911, it was for that reason. And that was too bad.

INT: It actually was designed after a Passeo in Mexico City. It's this big, wide… so he wanted it to be… to have that. And they knew that…

BARBARA: It's the widest… Isn't it the widest main street in, you know, North Hollywood or any of those streets? But because the Red Car was going down it, I think it probably was the widest one. Why Sylvan Street and Hamlin were wider, I have no idea. That was one of things my mother liked about it.

INT: Anything else?

BARBARA: Oh, I talked to Bill about when before they had the flood control, when the rains came, the cross streets north and south, were very, very turbulent with water and we would have to wear… anybody who lived, who had to walk to the High School or the Junior High School or whatever, we had to wear knee-high boots to step across this rushing water coming down Vesper, Cedros. And then the smell of 1949 in Van Nuys. (?) I guess that's it.

INT: That's great. Thank you very much.

Interviewed by Richard Hilton

Notes:
*It was Jane Russell who went to Van Nuys High School.
**It was the son, Ed. The father, Mark, died in 1936.
***1927
****1926
As of this writing, May 7, 2007, Ms. Baron has not seen this text for spelling corrections.